

A Christmas Story for T.J. and Nicky

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LCDR Tim "Spike" Prendergast was an F-14A RIO with VF-51 during the USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70)/CVW-15 October 1984–May 1985 WestPac/Indian Ocean deployment. To help deal with the family separation, he wrote this Navy-themed Christmas story for his sons. To make it personal, he included references to Vinson and to his pilot, LCDR Mark "Pig" Checchio.

It was the day before Christmas. But something was wrong! All day long, two brothers sat on the floor at home in front of their TV and listened carefully to the weather reports that kept interrupting their favorite afternoon shows. One of the brothers was very tall, with yellow hair and a tooth missing in the front of his smile. The other brother was just a little bit taller, with brown hair, more like his dad's. Things didn't look good for this Christmas.

They listened to the TV, "We interrupt this program to bring you another weather bulletin. The North Pole still remains totally covered in fog — the worst fog seen in that part of the world. With no end to this bad weather in sight, the world wonders if a certain jolly individual, wearing his trademark scarlet clothes, will be able to begin his annual flight around the world this Christmas Eve. We take you now to our reporter in northern Canada, where they have established radio contact with the North Pole."

"Hello from the Canadian wire services radio station in northern Canada. We have just established contact with the North Pole. Apparently the weather is clear directly over the North Pole, but very heavy fog and blinding snowstorms completely surround the outer area, making visual flight impossible. Santa, are you still listening? Is the weather getting any better?"

"Oh, yes, I'm still here! I landed the sleigh safely yesterday after coming home from Burke, Virginia, where I always go to visit the children before Christmas. The snow was right on my heels, I can tell you. We're safe and sound for the moment, but I don't see how we can possibly get out tonight in this weather."

"But, Santa," the TV announcer asked, "How about Rudolph and his famed red nose, won't that help you as it has in years past?"

"Oh, I wish he could. If it was only the fog, you know, Rudolph's nose would be more than enough to light the way. But all the snow and ice blowing around makes it quite impossible to see, even with all that rosy light. No, I'm afraid I may be unable to get out of the North Pole this year unless I can follow someone ..." Crackle ... pop ... buzz ... crack ...

The face of the announcer came back on TV.

"Well, it seems we've lost radio contact with the North Pole due to the severe storms in the area. Now back to our regular programming."

The two brothers, the one who was very tall, and the one who was just a little bit taller, looked at each other with worried looks.

"Gosh, Nicky," said the one who was just a little bit taller, "If Santa can't come, and with Dad being gone on his ship, this really won't be a very good Christmas."

"You're right, T.J.," said the brother with the black kitten sleeping on his tummy. "This could be the worst Christmas ever. I wish dad were here. He would think of something!"

"Yeah, you're right, Nicky, but dad said we were in charge while he was gone, so it's up to us, I guess."

"Boys! Dinner! Wash your hands." Their mom called from the kitchen. Suddenly, the little black kitten woke up, stretched until he was almost twice as long as normal, and wandered into the kitchen to see if there was anything good to eat, or at least fun to play with.

The boys' mom, who always worked hard to make holidays enjoyable, even when their dad was away, had made a special dinner, hoping to get the boys' minds off the weather reports, which were getting worse and worse. They had Christmas tacos, which are like regular tacos, except that they were on bright, Christmassy paper plates, and the red tomatoes and green lettuce looked like Christmas decorations. The two brothers each had three, and then helped their mom clean up, like they knew their dad would if he were home. After a few more TV shows, it was finally time for bed.

"I wish we could talk to Dad," said the very tall brother named Nicky, as he pulled on the thermal underwear his mom handed him from the warm, freshly laundered basket.

Mom tucked in the covers, and said, "You know, dads are special, sometimes if you think real hard what you want to say, dad's seem to know what you're thinking." She gave Nicky a little kiss, then stood up and gave T.J. a kiss, too. He slept in the top bunk and had already squirmed his cold toes down into the warmest part of the covers. "G'night, boys, and sweet dreams. Don't worry, even if the weather stays bad, we'll still have that nice turkey for tomorrow, even if Santa doesn't come." At the sound of the word turkey, the little black kitten and a bigger black cat right next to him on Nicky's bed, opened their eyes, meowed and then went back to sleep.

Then the boys' mom went downstairs. "Nicky, are you still awake?" said the boy in the top bed.

"Yes, T.J., I'm thinking as hard as I can, like mom said."

"Yeah, let's both do it, okay?"

And that is just what they did, until they gradually fell asleep.

Many thousands of miles away, on a huge aircraft carrier, the boys' dad heard the news. Because of the different time zones in the world, and the fact that the ship was on the other side of the international date line, it was lunchtime on Christmas Day aboard ship when the two brothers drifted off to sleep on Christmas Eve. The ship was steaming in the North Pacific Ocean, way north of Japan, and was tuned in to Japanese radio stations. Apparently, for the first time in almost 2,000 years, Santa had not visited any homes on the island of Japan or any of the other countries in that part of the world. The boys' dad knew that Christmas morning was slowly moving around the world as the sun came up in each country and would arrive in San Diego, where his family lived, in about 10 hours.

He had heard about the extremely bad weather up north. It was safe for jets to fly because radar helped them find their way, but flights had been canceled due to weather. It would be sad for his boys, if in addition to their dad not being home to help them with their new toys, they didn't get new toys because Santa couldn't make his annual trip. He knew, in the back of his mind, that T.J. and Nicky would be counting on him to figure out something. He could almost hear his boys say:

"Can't you think of something, Dad? You're good at thinkin' up stuff."

Suddenly, he did think up something. "Now, if I can only talk to the captain of the ship," he thought to himself, and off he went.

An hour later, just about the time it was turning midnight in San Diego, the boys' dad, and the pilot he flew with, nicknamed "Pig," were climbing into their F-14 *Tomcat*, which was full of gas and ready to go flying.

"You sure you can do this, Spike?" said the captain of the ship, as the boys' dad tightened all the straps and belts that held him in the jet. "You know the weather has been getting worse up north. We can't even see through it anymore with the ship's radar!"

"I know, Captain, but Pig and I have been practicing this kind of thing, and the F-14 radar will get us safely through it. Request you make radio contact with authorities in the north and see if you can get Santa to take off and stay in a circle in the clear area over the North Pole. It will be just like rendezvousing on the tanker."

With that, Pig and the boys' dad closed the canopy and the two powerful jet engines were started — the same engines that would make the jet go almost twice the speed of sound — and launched off the ship.

"Bring it starboard, steady up three six zero, Pig, direct for the North Pole," said the boys' dad, as he looked at the map attached to the little clipboard strapped to his knee.

"Okay, Spike, here we go. Let me know if you see anything on the radar," said Pig. The jet banked into a turn, and the wings began moving back as the F-14 went faster and faster.

"*Screaming Eagle One Zero Seven*, this is *Gold Eagle*. We have established radio contact with the North Pole and Santa says wilco on your request. He'll be orbiting overhead the Pole at angels ten in a left-hand turn. Good luck! *Gold Eagle* out."

That was the captain of the ship on the radio letting Spike know that Santa had received the message, and would be in the air, waiting for him at 10,000 feet.

The F-14 flew directly north, and the weather did get worse, like everyone said it would. But the F-14's two radar scopes glowed green in front of Spike's face, pointed out all the bad weather and all the mountaintops that the jet had to fly around.

"On the nose, Pig, at about two hundred miles, I can see the weather start to break up. It looks clear beyond that, but I don't see any airborne contacts, yet," said the boys' dad as he used every trick he knew with the radar trying to get a contact on a small target.



"Okay, Spike, keep the calls coming, just like we practiced," said Pig, who was looking out the front canopy and couldn't see anything, not even the front of the jet.

High overhead his brightly lit cluster of buildings at the North Pole, Santa looked down as he guided the reindeer in a steady circle. Pretty far up, he thought, and pretty good weather here, but I can't go five miles in any direction without being blinded by fog and snow. Even Rudolph's nose, which is bright enough to help get through most weather, won't help tonight.

Santa thought to himself, I hope this plan works. It's already Christmas Day in Asia, and the children in Europe will be waking up in a few hours. And then America. I have enough time to make my rounds in one day, but I'll have to start soon. With that, he tugged his white fur collar tighter against his cheeks and pulled his warm stocking cap a little snugger on his head.

The boys' dad continued to adjust the radar scope. With only a few miles to go until they reached the clear area, he still couldn't see anyone flying there. Suddenly, two little black specks appeared on the bright green radar scope.

"Contact! Two bogeys flying close together at angels ten. Pig, come a little starboard to put them on the nose. I'll stay in search to get a positive ID," said the boys' dad, as he gingerly moved his radar antenna up and down to get a better picture of the two little blips on his nose. Pig pushed the control stick gently to the right, and the F-14 banked into a turn as the boys' dad had requested.

"Okay, Pig, we've got him! It's not two contacts, it's one big contact and a cluster of tiny contacts in front. He's circling left at ten thousand feet just like we asked. He's fairly slow, so ease back the power. We should break out of the goo any second now."

Santa saw the reindeer look to the side before he heard anything, but soon, he too could hear a faraway roar growing closer and closer. Suddenly, a U.S. Navy jet, with flashing anti-collision lights, burst out of the wall of fog and snow into the clearing over Santa's house. It was a beautiful sight to see, as it banked gracefully into perfect intercept course.

"Tallyho!" said Pig. "Right on the nose, Spike. I've got a team of reindeer, with a red glow at the front, and a red contraption at the rear, full of bags, boxes and a rather plump looking gentleman. Nice work."

The boys' dad looked up from the scope and saw that Pig had taken over visual intercept. Soon they were flying alongside the sleigh, and Santa was slapping his knee and grinning from ear to ear. The reindeer seemed equally excited. Spike looked at Santa, reached up and tapped his helmet, signaling "I have the lead." Santa nodded, slowed the reindeer ever so gently, and dropped back into formation behind the brightly lit right wing of the F-14.

"Okay, Pig, we've got the lead. Steady out of your turn heading one eight zero. Next stop is the Japanese mainland."

Into the wall of snow and fog they went, the Navy fighter jet leading the way with its powerful radar, and the sleigh, pulled by tiny reindeer, easily following the winking bright lights on the wing of the jet.

Soon, all the presents destined for the children of Japan and the other island countries in that part of the world were delivered. Santa joined back up with the F-14, which was now running a little low on fuel, and continued west, hoping to make it through Asia and Europe before Christmas morning arrived.

The boys' dad knew that they couldn't escort Santa much farther west because they were headed into Russia. Russia was a big and powerful country, like the United States, but for some reason, they didn't always agree on things. Russia did not want American jets flying into their country. Spike was still navigating on radar when he picked up four little blips, closing fast from the direction of the Russian mainland.

"Okay, Pig, contact on a flight of four, closing fast, dead ahead. Probably MiGs, wondering why we're flying toward Russia. Stay straight and level, and don't do anything sudden," said Spike as he looked at the sleigh still holding close aboard his right wing.

"Here they come," said Pig. "Converting from the left. Four MiGs in tight formation." Pig and Spike wondered, now what?

Suddenly the radio headsets crackled to life. "Good evening, comrade. This is Russian pilot leader speaking. We have been watching your flight path on our radar scopes and want to thank you for breaking Saint Nicholas out of the bad weather up north. It was so bad up there, our jets couldn't take off until just now.





You are cleared into Russian airspace on your mission. Our first city bears two eight five magnetic at eighty miles. We'd better hurry, it's almost morning there, and the Russian children will be waking up in a few hours. You have the lead."

"Russian leader from *Screaming Eagle One Zero Seven*," said the boys' dad, breathing a sigh of relief into his tightly fitting oxygen mask, "thanks for the clearance, but we're running a little low on fuel and will have to return to our ship soon."

"Ah, comrade," said the Russian pilot, "after all your work to bring Christmas morning to the children of my country, it would be unthinkable for us to not have some fuel to give you in return. Look out ahead of you."

Spike and Pig looked up to see the biggest Russian tanker jet they had ever seen flying straight ahead of them, with refueling hose extended. The F-14 joined up with the tanker, connected with the hose and filled the nearly empty tanks inside the *Tomcat*. As they were taking fuel, they could see the Russian crewmen waving and smiling from inside the big plane, and holding up little Christmas trees. All Spike and Pig could do was wave and smile back. Their jet was too small to have Christmas stuff on board.

"Hey, Pig. Go full bright on the anti-collision lights and the formation lights, too," said Spike. With that, all the red and green lights on the F-14 were turned on full bright and looked quite cheerful. Then, all the Russian airplanes did the same. The Christmas night sky over eastern Russia was suddenly alive with winking red and green airplane lights. With the big tanker in front, followed by Pig, Spike, Santa and the four Russian fighters, the formation looked like a huge Christmas tree flying westward, chasing Christmas Eve.

In a few hours, all the Russian cities, towns, villages, hamlets and farms had been visited, and the European border was coming up.

"Here's where we must leave you, comrade," said the Russian pilot leader. "Germany is straight ahead, and we understand German interceptors are coming to join."

"Thanks for the escort," said Spike, "and for the gas too. We're glad we didn't miss this part of the flight."

"Thank you, comrade. Without your courage and good ideas, thousands of Russian children would have had no Christmas this year. Do you have any children at home?" asked the Russian pilot leader.

"Yes, I have two wonderful boys; one who is very tall, and one who is just a little bit taller," said the boys' dad, thinking of his sons and beautiful wife he missed so much.

"Ah, I too have two fine sons. They think they want to fly fighter jets like their father, but I think that after a few more nights like this, my American friend, our countries may have less need of fighter pilots. Russian jets detaching. Good luck, and Merry Christmas!" The four MiGs banked away slowly and were soon out of sight.

Goodbye to you, too, my Russian friend, thought Spike. I hope you are right. Looking up, Spike saw the flight of German fighters joining from the left.

"*Guten nacht, mein friends!*" said the German pilot leading his flight. "You have clearance across northern Europe, and there are African fighters holding over the Mediterranean Sea to pick you up from there."

And so it went throughout that long night. At every border, Pig and Spike were joined by fighters to continue the Christmas escort of the F-14 and the sleigh as they continued to every country in Europe, Africa, South and Central America. Everywhere, it was the same, happy talk of Christmas's past and best wishes for Christmas's to come. Gone were the wary suspicions with which these fighter pilots from different nations normally regarded each other, replaced by an overwhelming sense of purpose — that Santa made his rounds and returned safely to the North Pole.

When the flight finally reached the West Coast of the United States, Pig and Spike orbited while Santa made his rounds over San Diego. It was most difficult not to land at Miramar and go home to be with their families on Christmas morning. No, they couldn't do that. There were still many children in western Canada, Alaska and Hawaii who waited

for their presents before Santa's flight was finished. As Santa joined up overhead San Diego and the F-14 turned north to lead him to cities farther up the Coast, Spike saw Santa looking at him, smiling broadly and nodding slowly. Dad knew then that his two boys, the one who was very tall, and the one who was just a little bit taller, had received something extra special under their tree.

After several hours, Santa had completed his rounds. The F-14 had been refueled in the air many times since it launched from USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN-70). Santa's sleigh was empty now, needing only an escort back through the fog and blowing snow to the safety and warmth of the cozy cottage at the top of the world.

"*Screaming Eagle One Zero Seven*, this is *Icepack Leader*, do you read me? Over." Spike keyed his mike switch and replied:

"Roger, I read you, *Icepack*. Have you any instructions for us?"


"Affirmative, Spike. Interceptors from the Alaskan Air National Guard have you on radar and will assume escort duties at this time. They'll get Santa back to the Pole okay. You are cleared to detach. *Vinson* is 100 miles west of your present position and waiting for you."

Spike looked over at Santa to give him a signal that he was detaching, but Santa was already banking away slowly, the reindeer heading for the winking lights of the Alaskan jets joining from the north. Santa gave a great big wave of his fur-gloved hand, and boomed "Merry Christmas!" Pig and Spike heard it over the sound of their jet engines as they turned west, put the ship on their nose and prepared for landing.

Many thousands of miles away, the sun was coming up in San Diego where two brothers lived — one who was very tall, and one who was just a little bit taller. As they usually did, they raced downstairs and saw their mom staring at the tree, which they had decorated only days before. Beneath it were wonderful presents, but it wasn't until the boys looked closely that they noticed why their mom was stunned.



Yes, this was the tree they had decorated, and yes, those were the presents they had asked for, and there were the little gifts they had made so carefully in school for mom. But, where did all the ornaments come from? Gone were the red and gold balls and cloth apples they had hung. In their place, were hundreds of handmade ornaments from every country in the world — from Japan, China and the Philippines, from Australia, Thailand and India, from Turkey, Israel and Africa, from France, Spain and Switzerland and all the countries in South America. And hanging directly in the middle of the tree was a handmade ornament, obviously very carefully made that contained a photograph of two Russian boys, wearing fur hats and playing in front of a snowman.

One of the Russian boys was very tall, and the other was just a little bit taller. 

Ed. Note: This fun story was published after the holidays to honor the Christmas spirit and to foster good will throughout the seasons of The Hook.